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ABSTRACT

The paper reviews court decisions mandating extended-year programs for students with severe and multiple handicaps for whom regression during the summer break threatens the development of independence and addresses considerations in developing such extended year programs. Guidelines center on eligibility, funding, program focus, program length, beginning dates for assessment and planning, opportunities for integration, staffing considerations, and instructional delivery. The paper stresses the value of maintaining instructional continuity, maximizing instruction, making the best use of available resources, and combining instruction with recreational activities. (CL)

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Developing and Implementing Summer-School Programs for Students with Severe Handicaps[1]

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Abstract

Recent emphasis has been placed on providing extended-year educational programs for students with severe and multiple handicaps. Court decisions have mandated extended-year programs for students with severe handicaps for whom regression during summer break threatens their development of independence. Unfortunately, developers of summer programs have few guidelines to use in setting up effective programs. This paper suggests some considerations in developing extended-year programs. Its focus is on maintaining instructional continuity, maximizing instruction, making best use of available resources, and combining instruction with recreational activities.

Developing and implementing summer-school programs for students with severe handicaps

The need for extended-year schooling for students with severe handicaps has been stressed on legal and educational grounds (e.g., Larsen, Goodman, & Glean, 1981; Stainback, Stainback, & Hatcher, 1983). Regression of skills and subsequent time required to recoup the lost skills after summer vacation are a common and severe problem for many (if not all) severely handicapped learners. McMahon (1983) demonstrated that for the 26 subjects he followed, learning slowed and regression began when education was interrupted, but this did not occur when an extended-year program filled the interruption. This finding is not surprising when one considers that the amount of instructional time provided has been well recognized as an important factor influencing learning by students with severe handicaps (Fredricks, Anderson, & Baldwin, 1979). A simple and direct means of increasing cumulative, annual instructional time and instructional trials is by providing additional weeks or months of instruction during the summer. Even for students who do not exhibit a clear pattern of regression over summers and holidays, but whose learning rate is slower than other students, more instructional days provides a simple means of catching up. A more gradually accelerating learning slope will approach the level of a steeper learning slope, if given more days of instruction.

As the need for these programs becomes more generally accepted, interest is shifting from providing a rationale for their existence to determining optimal program parameters. Policies, procedures and standards for summer programs must be considered to ensure maximum benefit. A few basic findings and assumptions have been brought forth to guide this process, but much

remains to be determined. Larsen, Goodman and Glean (1981) have stressed the need for similarity between "school-year" and "extended year" programs. Zdundich (1984) found that highly structured programs were more successful in maintaining skills and building new ones. While helpful, these guidelines leave many questions to be considered by developers of summer programs. The purpose of this paper is to identify some of these questions, along with some examples from our own experience. In accordance with the conference guidelines which emphasize the need and desire for "how to" information and in view of the lack of much empirical research with direct application to the questions raised, practical application will be emphasized.

1. WHO SHOULD BE SERVED?

Probably all children with severe handicaps would benefit from a summer program. Eligibility under court rulings in the U.S. (Battle v. Commonwealth, 1980; Armstrong v. Kline, 1979) requires three components: (1) severe or profound handicaps, (2) evidence of problems with regression during interruptions of the educational process, (3) reason for an assumption that a break in the educational program would interfere with the student's development of maximum self-sufficiency. Programs not limited by funding to serving those for whom services are court mandated may want to adopt broader criteria. If other similar programs already exist, eligibility requirements may be developed that complement existing programs by aiming toward currently unserved students rather than competing for the same ones. The size of the developing program should also be considered. While heterogeneity and integration are desirable in any program, larger programs, with more staff and classrooms can often meet the needs of a wider array of students. Smaller classrooms may require more restrictive

standards, unless careful planning provides methods of meeting a very wide array of individual needs in just a few classrooms.

2. WHERE SHOULD FUNDING BE SOUGHT?

As a result of court mandated educational summer programs, at least some programs can expect budgeted funds from their school system. These funds may not be available for every student, however, and even when available may not be adequate to provide all desirable services. Other sources of private and public funds should be considered. For example, student employment programs may target college and high-school students during the summer, and college programs may have students who want to complete practicum placements during the summer. Parent and advocacy groups, as well as charitable organizations may provide funds.

As an example, last summer, I was associated with two programs in Edmonton. Extended-year programs are not mandated by law in Canada, but services have generally been available. One program was run by the Public schools which paid 85% of its costs (15% came from other sources). The other program was run by a parent-advocacy organization (Alberta Association for Dependent Handicapped). It supplemented its own funds with other sources including a grant from Employment and Immigration Canada, which paid much of the programs staff as a summer works project. Both programs ran well. The privately run program operated much less expensively, but with no loss of quality.

3. WHAT SHOULD BE THE PROGRAM FOCUS?

Since the primary rationale for extended-year programs has been to maintain learning that might otherwise be lost over the summer, continuity with school-year programs is important. This focus on maintenance has been

stressed (Larsen, Goodman, & Glean, 1981; Stainback, Stainback, & Hatcher, 1983) for good reason in the literature. Other components may also be considered, however. For example, summer programs often present excellent opportunities for generalization. Changes in staff, setting, instructional presentation, and scheduling provide great opportunities to teach the generalization of skills. Summer weather provides the opportunity in many regions for increased outdoor activity which may be ideal for specific students and specific objectives. The relatively short time-frame provided may make a single central focus desirable. For example, one of our local summer programs emphasized communication last summer. Of course, each student had their own individual objectives (including communication objectives), but the stress on communication meant hiring staff with specialized skills in that area and consideration of the communication component in all other programs. Finally, recreation and leisure skills deserve careful consideration. This should not detract from the instructional intent of the program, but for most non-handicapped students, summer is a time to enjoy. Extended-year students should have a right to the same fun. The trick is combining fun activities with education. In fact they need not conflict.

To provide adequate instruction and recreation: (a) make sure the days are scheduled long enough to accommodate both, (b) eliminate down-time where the student does nothing, (c) work on increasing "on-task" lesson times, (d) work on increasing the pace of instruction, (e) make certain recreational activities have real functional learning opportunities and objectives built in to them, and (f) provide opportunities in recreational activities for functional use of skills taught in repeated trial instruction.

4. HOW LONG SHOULD THE PROGRAM RUN?

Most school-year programs leave ten to twelve weeks for summer. Of course, as previously stated, the more instruction provided, the more learning can be expected. This argues for the longest possible summer program. Many parents seem to prefer a slightly shorter program. They may want part of the summer to travel or just spend at home as a family. A nice alternative is a flexible program which runs for as many weeks as possible, but allows students to attend for only part of the time. It is important for program planning that the time of participation is agreed to ahead of time. It may be necessary to limit the available attendance options to avoid too complicated a tangle of schedule changes that may threaten program continuity.

5. WHEN SHOULD THE PROGRAM START?

This may seem obvious, but in fact some elements of the program should be started well ahead of the arrival of the students. This is especially true for short duration programs. Unless assessment and program planning are done prior to the student's starting date, a major part of the time available will be used up before quality individualized programming can begin. Programs that simply continue school-year programs over the summer, of course, avoid much of this problem of restarting.

6. HOW MIGHT INTEGRATION BE ACCOMPLISHED?

Some opportunities for integration that are available during the school-year may be unavailable during the summer. Many schools are emptied out providing little opportunity for integration of the few remaining extended-year students. On the other hand, opportunities for integration in non-school settings are generally increased. Camps, recreational programs,

community parks and public commercial enterprises provide a rich environment for age-appropriate integrated activities. Episodic field-trips without specific objectives should be avoided, but regular, functional, age-appropriate recreational and community domain interactions with specific instruction and active participation provide excellent learning opportunities and potential for meaningful integration.

7. HOW SHOULD PROGRAMS BE STAFFED?

Considerations in staffing for extended-year programs are not much different than for other programs. Our experience has been that more than enough capable staff are interested in working during summer programs. Conditions of employment in programs run by schools will generally be ruled by the staff contract in effect. Privately run programs have considerable flexibility. In Edmonton, our school-based program paid teachers on the per diem rate they earn under their contact. For some teachers, this was $200 per day or more. The privately run program paid much less (about one third), yet both were able to attract qualified and competent staff. Stainback, Stainback, and Hatcher (1983) have stressed the need for qualified staff. Certification requirements vary regionally and may be more appropriate in some regions than others. Qualification must be based on training and demonstrated competence. Summer programs are too short to accommodate the figure-it-out-as-you-go staffing that is already problematic in many school-year programs.

The needs of the students to be served and any specific areas targeted for instruction should be considered in staffing. While obtaining the disciplinary expertise required is essential, preparing and selecting staff who will release some of their traditional roles and function as part of a

transdisciplinary team is also very important. For example, in one program the school nurse functioned primarily as a teaching assistant, but assumed her nursing role in emergencies, to administer medications and to provide consultation when needed.

8. HOW SHOULD INSTRUCTION BE PROVIDED?

The instructional model selected will vary from program to program, from student to student, and sometimes from lesson to lesson. It is important, however, to provide instruction in a consistent manner so that students can adjust and reap maximum benefits. Group instruction should be used for at least part of the day. This improves staff efficiency, helps eliminate down-time, and increases instructional time. It also teaches a valuable classroom skill needed before students with severe handicaps can be served in classrooms for students with less severe handicaps. The use of functional activities enhances generalization and should also be included in the program. Functional activities, however, probably should not replace all repeated-trial instruction since the number of instructional trials that can be provided is typically much greater with repeated trials instruction.

These eight considerations are only a small part of the concerns that must be addressed in developing high quality extended-year programs for students with severe and multiple handicaps. Future research, program descriptions, and program evaluations will help establish future guidelines for developing extended-year programs.

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